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REVIEW ESSAY

IN PURSUIT OF A DISAPPEARING PARADIGM

Martin N. Murphy

U.S. Naval Strategy and National Security: The Evolution of American Maritime Power, by Sebastian Bruns. London: Routledge, 2018. 270 pages. \$155.

The past quarter century has not been a happy one for the U.S. Navy. It has been a period of almost continuous contraction: of budgets, ships, manpower, bases, influence—at sea and in Washington—and military superiority. The Navy has been forced to watch the rise of China to a position of near equivalence and the return of Russia from near death. It has been humiliated by ship collisions that were brought about by sacrificing operational standards in an attempt to maintain its can-do reputation. It has become the service that must “just say no” if it is to stay afloat.

The Navy has been through periods before when it was understood poorly and undervalued: the treaty years in the 1920s, the era of massive retaliation in the 1950s, and during and after the Vietnam War. In each case it was saved by national policy changes, first under President Franklin Roosevelt, who viewed naval construction as part of the New Deal; second, under President Kennedy, whose turn to flexible response released the surface navy from its deterrence responsibilities, allowing it to resume its sea-control mission; and third, under President Reagan, who adopted the Maritime Strategy. Since then the Navy has

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been wandering in the strategic wilderness, finding it difficult—indeed, almost impossible—to rediscover its voice as it searches for the formula that will return it to its rightful place in the defense firmament.

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The story of that search is the subject of this book. Its author, Sebastian Bruns, serves as head of the Center for Maritime Strategy and Security at the University of Kiel, Germany; is the coeditor of the recently published *Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security*; and has served his time on Capitol Hill. His book covers the trials and tribulations of this period with an almost forensic eye, placing each of the numerous relevant capstone documents—starting with the hopefully entitled “The Way Ahead” in 1991—in its political and operational setting before examining its evolution and resulting strategic concept.

Pointing a finger at what has gone wrong is not difficult. Since the end of the Cold War, the Navy for the most part has suffered from a lack of leadership at its most senior level. Admittedly, leading the Navy in an era when the nation’s leaders stumbled from one misjudgment to the next cannot have been easy. Furthermore, the Cold War-era Goldwater-Nichols measures subordinated each of the service chiefs to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and relieved them of responsibility for strategy. As Bruns writes, it was the Navy—whose strategy lies uniquely between the political and operational levels—that was affected most.

Making matters more difficult was that the seemingly interminable and debilitating land wars in Asia placed the focus squarely on the Army and Marine Corps, and to a considerable degree the Air Force, but not the Navy, save for the thousands of bluejackets who were sent to serve in the dusty wastes of Afghanistan and Iraq. Not that service ashore for sailors is unusual; it was the regular fate of their Royal Navy predecessors in the nineteenth century to fight and die beside their army colleagues in defense of the empire. What the Royal Navy of that era did not suffer, however, was seeing its capacities and capabilities worn down by the need to pay for these wars, as the U.S. Navy’s were worn down to pay for the war in Vietnam, and as they have been more recently as well.

Can the Navy rebuild itself now as it did after the Vietnam conflict and the hostile interlude of the Carter years? On its current course, and given the prevailing bureaucratic realities of the defense establishment, this appears unlikely. The Maritime Strategy came about thanks to an unusually fortuitous alignment of factors: first, a sympathetic national policy, in this case the determination of the Reagan administration not merely to contain Communism but to defeat it; and second, an exploitable enemy weakness, in this case the surprise discovery that the Soviet navy prioritized protection of its High North submarine bastions over attacks on Atlantic convoys. The combination meant that the U.S. Navy could build on a range of thought lines—of which Admiral Thomas B. Hayward’s earlier Sea Strike initiative was probably the most influential—to go on the offensive, pursuing a carrier-based plan of attack that accorded with the Navy’s own view of itself as a warrior community built for the big—and *global*—fight. As Bruns recounts, the Navy was willing to accept enormous strategic and operational risks

to make that happen; in particular, its conviction that global conventional war would not turn nuclear, although based on intelligence of Soviet nuclear policy, must be open to question.

Bruns describes the outpouring of purposeful naval thinking that accompanied the Maritime Strategy as a “renaissance.” With it, the Navy achieved its Cold War “zenith.” It was certainly close to a revival. The Maritime Strategy was, Bruns writes, “a product of its 1970s context,” embracing the missions, concepts, and practices that were already on the shelf and matching them with the Reagan administration’s newly assertive national security strategy and with the plans and operational requirements of regional commanders. It succeeded not because it was innovative but because it fitted with what the Navy wanted to do. It reached back to Vice Admiral Forrest P. Sherman’s immediate post–World War II plan for “at source” attacks on Soviet naval bases and infrastructure and, beyond that, to the Navy’s successful Pacific War campaign against Japan. It fitted perfectly with the American way of warfare, which prefers decisive battle over patient persistence.

The post–Cold War world proved to be very different from what had gone before. It may have been a “new world order,” as President George H. W. Bush put it, but the order to which he referred remained elusive. In this new context, innovative thinking was required, and the Navy responded—even though, too often, good ideas that appeared in the formative stages of strategy formulation never made the final cut.

Bruns’s survey of the strategic vision pieces that have followed the Maritime Strategy, however, reveals a service divided among competing schools of naval and maritime thought. The result is that none of the strategic vision pieces the Navy has published since 1990 have come close to winning support at a level similar to that achieved by their 1980s predecessor, and most have gained none at all. The Maritime Strategy may have been disputed, criticized, and disparaged, but it nonetheless succeeded in uniting the Navy Department, the White House, and Congress behind a single vision.

When the Navy did advance a radically different exposition of its role, a decade and a half later, in “A Cooperative Strategy for Twenty-First Century Seapower” (CS21), it failed to gain enough traction within the Navy and on the Hill to survive the political and economic fallout of the 2008 financial crisis. CS21 argued that in the post–Cold War world it would be by defending the institutional, systemic dimension of sea power that the Navy would be restored to relevance, and it elevated war prevention to the same level as war winning; in doing so, it sidelined all the strategic concepts that had been formulated since the Maritime Strategy. Unfortunately, the message of CS21 failed to inspire a service that viewed the Maritime Strategy as the zenith of its conceptual accomplishments.

Bruns's book demands to be read. It reaches no conclusions about which direction is right for the Navy—that is for readers to decide. What he does make plain is that only a “strategy addressing political ends in naval warfare can be assured some impact.” Both the Maritime Strategy and CS21 did that, but from sharply different perspectives.

The sea's strategic and economic importance is increasing at a time when the nations intent on challenging the U.S. Navy are gaining in confidence, competence, and strength. To be able to counter them effectively, it is vital that the Navy finds again the clear, united, and distinctive voice that has commanded attention in the past, but one that this time puts past triumphs behind it, reflects the realities of our changing world, and addresses the complex of military and nonmilitary challenges its competitors present. Now is the time for strategic imagination, for the creation of a strategy that transcends the narrow confines of shipboard life and engages with the political as well as the military realities that are emerging in the twenty-first century.

All USN officers, joint commanders, and national policy makers who are conscious of the sea's continuing importance, genuinely concerned about the decline of the Navy, and fearful for the service's future need to read this book and absorb its lessons.